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ABSTRACT

Pointing out that stresses that children must deal with have increased in recent years while their sources of adult support have decreased, this paper defines stress, indicates sources of stress, describes coping patterns, lists signs of stress in children, and describes helping strategies through which adults, and teachers particularly, can support children experiencing stressful conditions. Three types of stress are defined: (1) tensions arising from frustration; (2) pressure to develop; and (3) the experience of traumatic events. From an ecological perspective, sources of stress in the micro-, exo-, and macro-systems impinging on children are identified to provide an image of the complexity of stress. To avoid stress, children take typical evasive actions; these are listed along with ways children devise to face and handle stressful events. Thirty-one signs that children are experiencing high levels of stress are listed. In conclusion, teachers are advised that they can help stressed children by removing at least one stressor, by demonstrating how coping strategies can be transferred to other life situations, by teaching new coping strategies, and by teaching children to identify and face stress. (RH)

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CHILDREN UNDER STRESS

PAPER PRESENTED AT

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CHILDREN UNDER STRESS

Without stress, life could never be. The natural rhythms of living are formed by tension and relaxation. Tensions or stress builds up, is resolved, is built up again, and resolved again. Stress may be increased, facilitated, or eliminated by events from outside of the individual. People vary in their ability or capacity to deal with different kinds of stress. This quality of resilience apparently varies from birth, and may have a genetic component; but it is also likely that this resiliency is fostered or reduced by environmental conditions--particularly in the early years (Moore, 1969).

Children face and somehow deal with a myriad of tensions from birth to puberty. In recent years, however, the severity and number of stresses that children must deal with have increased significantly. It also appears that children of today have fewer sources of adult support, affirmation, or love than children in the past. This is attested to by the increase in the number of children with working mothers, the increase in child abuse and the increase in single-parent homes (Brenner, 1984).

Elkind, in his book, The Hurried Child (1981), points out that children are being pressured to grow up faster; that protected, sheltered children are a rarity. Childhood appears to be eroding. In their everyday demeanor, their language, the things they know and do, and in their relations with the adult world, children have changed. The greatest change may not be that children have lost their innocence; it may be in the adult's conception of childhood. Where parents once felt obligated to protect and shelter their children, adults today believe their children must be exposed to adult experience in order to be safe. "The Age of Protection has ended. The Age of Preparation has set in" (Winn, 1983, 40).

Not all stresses are harmful. The struggle to learn to ride a bike or to read are good examples of how stress can be perceived as a challenge. A challenge that helps one grow toward a more mature form of behavior. Stress is an expected and normal part of human development; and stress marks the passage of developmental milestones throughout life.

But just what is stress? For convenience we can distinguish three types of stress (Moore, 1969). First, there is the ordinary stress which is a part of daily life. These are the stresses or tensions which arise when a need is unmet, when an effort is frustrated, or when needs or goals or expectations are incompatible. For example, in our society young boys are frequently caught between the incompatible expectations of the classroom and that of the traditional male sex role. Should he be the "good" student and sit quietly and be orderly; or should he be "all boy" and be rough, rowdy, and noisy?

These everyday stresses can be dealt with in a variety of ways. The environment in which the child grows and the people in his world may add to, complicate, or diminish his stress, depending on the ways they meet or fail to meet his needs. For example the elementary teacher may unknowingly place stress on her students with homework assignments. Children in dual-earner or single-parent homes may not arrive home until 6:00 p.m. or after. By the time dinner routines are handled it is time for bed and bath. When does the child do the homework? Who does he have available to assist him? School work and family expectations may be in conflict. Adults can show children how to cope with everyday stress successfully; or through their lack of understanding or sympathy they can increase the stress the child feels. The teacher can limit homework assignments, the caregiver can provide a place and assistance to help the child, and his family, cope with this stress.

"A second type of stress arises at those times of life when the child or adult must take a decisive step forward, one that involves altering his habits and his view of himself in relation to others" (Moore, 1969,p. 236). These are the stresses that grow out of development itself. if the child does not take these developmental steps whole-heartedly, he may be vulnerable to stress. If developmental tasks or events are not mastered, later failures may arise which will be stressful to the child. Learning to read, write and calculate is a developmental task or expectation of the school age child (Havinghurst, 1952). Children face stress in accomplishing the task, and if they fail stress is bound to increase. The child who cannot, or does not, master developmental expectations will suffer stress to a greater degree than does the child who masters the task.

The events which give life its unique shape give rise to the third type of stress (Moore, 1969). Events such as illness, separations, changes in family structure or family living patterns may all be stressful. These events not only make demands on the child, but they also affect the behavior of other family members thus changing the interaction patterns to which the child is accustomed.

To date, research on childhood tension has been primarily limited to the negative experiences. We do not know the nature of the stress that occurs when a child is chosen for the lead role in the school play, plans and celebrates at a birthday party, or opens a gift and sees a coveted toy. Lists of childhood stresses have been developed which rank life events in order of the amount of tension which adults suppose each will cause for youngsters (Chandler, 1982). Positive experiences such as attending camp, celebrating a birthday, or being selected team captain are uniformly considered by adults to involve low levels of stress (Coddington, 1972; Cohen-Sandler, Berman, and King, 1982). There are, however, no assessments of the degree to which children agree with these adult estimates (Brenner, 1984).

Childhood stress is difficult to research for a number of reasons. First, there are a wide variety of stimuli that are potentially stressful; secondly, the intensity of the stressors differ; thirdly, the duration of the stress varies, and finally, the interaction of different stressors in the child's life produces varying results.

Stress may arise from either internal factors or from external factors (McNamee, 1982). Some stresses are acute in a child's life; they arise suddenly, are isolated instances, and their impact is brief. Others are chronic or long-lasting. The impact of multiple stressors may be cumulative even for the most well-adjusted child. Typically more than one stress occurs in the child's life at a time. When more than one stress is present, the combined effects increase geometrically rather than in simple additive terms (Honig, 1986). Rutter (1979) found a multiplier effect when children were exposed to more than one short-term strain. These brief tensions, which Lazarus calls hassles, exhibit a multiplier effect and, in adults, numerous concurrent hassles have been found to have deeper effects on mental health than do individual instances of major stress (Kanner, Coyne, Schaeffer, and Lazarus, 1981).

THE ECOLOGY OF STRESS

The Ecological approach can be used to explore the concept of interaction of stressors. Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Belsky (1980) postulate that youngsters live simultaneously in a microsystem, an exosystem, and a macrosystem. These systems can be visualized as concentric circles, the microsystem in the center surrounded by the exosystem; and the exosystem surrounded by the macrosystem. By examining the stressors in each system and recognizing that each continuously interact with and affects the stressors in the other systems, it is possible to recognize the complexity of stress.

> "The microsystem consists of the child's own characteristics, his family setting, and his interaction patterns. Stress in the microsystem can be caused by the process of maturing physically, intellectually, and emotionally; becoming the object of new rules and regulations; and being required to take responsibility for self and siblings. Changes in the microsystem produce stress as the family adds new members and adjusts to the varying needs of children and adults" (Brenner, 1984, p. 3).

Variables such as prematurity, sex, temperament, age of the child, and intellectual capacity have been associated with different kinds of stress in children's lives (Honig, 1986). All of these are apart of the microsystem.

Predictable source of microsystem stress for children is the fact that they continuously grow and change. No sooner does a family get used to living with their child than he moves into a new stage and the family has to find new ways of relating. As much as parents want children to grow up, it is still a strain for both the parent and the child to recognize that they have indeed developed new abilities which require different levels of planning and judgment (Brenner, 1984).

Normal family events such as the birth of a sibling may be stressful. These events trigger ambivalent feelings of love, hate, protectiveness and jealousy, that last for the rest of the child's life (McNamee, 1982).

Even in the most stable and peaceful families, fighting occurs from time to time. Children are the physical targets of their parents displeasure, especially if they are considered too young to understand verbal reasoning. According to an extensive study by Straus and his colleagues (1980) the majority of parents use some form of violence at some time during the child's life. In addition to the stress caused by being physically punished and by their own fights with family members, children become tense when they observe their parents' marital conflicts. These experiences appear to be uniformly frightening to youngsters and many children believe themselves to be the cause of their parent's fights (Barnett, et al., 1980).

> "The exosystem encompasses the family's social networks of acquaintances, friends, and relatives. It includes the neighborhood in which they live and the children's school and day care arrangements. Exosystem sources of stress arise when families move to new homes, add or subtract relatives, join or leave religious organizations, and when there are changes in parental employment status" (Brenner, 1984, p. 3).

The living environments of some children seriously increase the risk of stress because of neighborhood crime; criminal and antisocial role models; and unaesthetic, dreary, or garbage-cluttered streets (Honig, 1986). Some homes and apartments are so crowded that the number of persons per room does not permit the privacy and play space children need (Zuravin, 1985).

Today's families are highly mobile and children typically live in several neighborhoods during the course of their first 18 years of life (Bank and Kahn, 1982). Whether the move is across the country or only across town, most parents do little to prepare their children to give up the known environment and old friends. All too frequently, youngsters have no opportunity to help choose or even visit the new home (Levine, 1976). Children tend to identify themselves with specific spaces, repeated events, and familiar persons; thus leaving can cause disorientation and stress.

Entering a new school, or even a new classroom in the fall, is stressful for children. They must find ways to fit into an existing milieu and learn the system for getting what they want. School is also the place where children are faced with their first decisions about obeying or breaking the law. As long ago as 1976, Yankelovich, Skelly, and White reported that most elementary children were personally acquainted with children who broke the law, were picked up by the police, or stole things (General Mills American Family Report, 1976, p. 77). Children watch their classmates break the law and then must cope with the stress of making decisions for themselves about these issues. Often they are under pressure from their peers and make their choices without the knowledge or help of adult family members.

When both parents work, arrangements for the care of children are central to the way the family functions. The general consensus of research on working parents is that most working parents report an increase in their own feelings of stress as they attempt to juggle complex schedules. Children sense and are affected by these tensions. In addition, children may be stressed as they are forced to adapt to a series of child care providers (Skinner, 1980).

In contrast to living with two working parents daily life when there is an unemployed spouse can be relatively calm. If the parent perceives him or herself to be in the process of changing jobs rather than out of work, there is little stress for family members. However, the effects of long-term unemployment are stressful for children. As the tension level increases for their parents, youngsters feel the effects. This is especially true when the parent becomes depressed by futile job hunting efforts (Ferman, 1979).

The macrosystem encircles both the micro- and exosystems. The macrosystem is made up of the cultural values and beliefs of the surrounding larger society (Brenner, 1984). The macrosystem also includes overriding cultural conditions--economic, political, and moral. When a family deviates from accepted cultural norms stress occurs. Macrosystem attitudes toward the racial and religious groups to which a child belongs can create pride or shame.

Perhaps the most severe of the ordinary life stresses faced by children are those which result from being poor. More than 12 million children in the U.S. today live in poverty. Eleven and one-half percent of all families with children under the age of 18 live below the poverty level (A Children's Defense Budget, 1987). This means that there are more than 12 million children who often go to bed hungry, who live in substandard housing, or who receive little or no health care.

The stresses are somewhat different for children in families where poverty is a chronic condition as compared with those where income has suddenly been reduced. This second group, a growing population in Oklahoma, until recently had been providing adequately for their children. Many still own homes and now have to choose between paying the mortgage or buying food. Their children must quickly adjust to the new lower standard of living and to being dependent on welfare programs or charity. These children experience the stress of watching their parent's humiliation at standing in line for free food and accepting donations of used clothing. They experience humiliation as they are no longer able to "keep up" with their peer group.

Children are all too often not taught how to cope, yet somehow they learn. They use the resources of the microsystem--strategies they devise for themselves or advice from parents and siblings. They use the teachings of the exosystem--influences of teachers, religious leaders, neighbors and friends. And they use the subtle messages from the macrosystem--television and other media-- and the interactions they have with institutions as they learn to cope with stress.

COPING WITH STRESS

Just as stress is a part of life, so too is the way children cope with unexpected events and adapting to long-term changes. Coping always involves mental and/or physical actions (Iscoe, 1977). Over time, patterns of coping develop for children as well as adults. These can become routine and may even differ from child to child and for different kinds of stresses.

Infants can be observed to respond in habitual ways to new experiences. They develop patterns that are carried to later years of development. An infant may be observed to look intently at an object, reach for the object, examine the object carefully, and then begin to poke or mouth the object. Another infant can be observed to reach for the object and with little visual attention given to the

object begin to explore it by immediately mouthing it. These patterns are repeated as infants grow older.

As children grow older they begin to learn additional adapting patterns. They observe others near to them and learn coping modes from parents, siblings, peers, teachers, and relatives. Coping is typical for children of all ages. Daily experiences result in a child demonstrating his/her own coping mode (i.e., reactions to separation, strangers, death of a pet). Most times children are not aware of their coping techniques. They simply react to a stressful situation. Children may attempt to avoid a stressful event...and this is useful as a short term approach. When a child adapts to the stress and acknowledges and accepts the stress we see this behavior as healthy over the long term (Brenner, 1984).

The most typical evasive actions that children use to avoid stress are as follows:

DENIAL:
- -Acts as though stress does not exist.
- -May use fantasy as a coping technique. Imaginary friends are common.
- -Serves to lessen pain and thus can be useful to preserve equilibrium.

REGRESSION:
- -Acting younger than years. Becomes dependent and demanding.
- -Receives more physical comforting and affection than usual, thus easing the stress.

WITHDRAWAL:
- -Take themselves physically or mentally out of the picture.
- -Focus on pets, daydreaming, or remove themselves from the situation.

IMPULSIVE ACTING OUT:
- -Conceal their misery by making others angry at them.
- -Attention is focused on them, temporary way of easing their feelings of stress.

Children may devise ways of facing and handling stress events in their lives. Vaillant (1977) has identified the following five:

ALTRUISM: Gain satisfaction from the helper role and from knowing that they are being useful. They forget their own troubles by helping others. However, they may become so enwrapped in the helping that they do not allow themselves to be carefree.

HUMOR: Children may joke about their difficulties. The humor may be used to express the anger and pain they feel. However, when carried to an extreme, children may lose the ability to cry and to reach out to others.

SUPPRESSION: Enables children to set aside their troubles for a time. This can be the time when a child re-groups or regains his/her strength. Carried to an extreme, it can move to the point of denial.

ANTICIPATION: When children use anticipation they are able to foresee and plan for the next stressful episode. They begin to protect themselves and to accept what cannot be avoided. However, a child may become too fearful and become compulsive about needing to know what is coming next and how to plan for it.

SUBLIMATION: Children may vent their fears, anger or frustrations through absorption in an unrelated activity (sports, hobbies, etc.). These activities give them satisfactions and provide a relief for the stressful events in their lives. However, should they become too absorbed in the activities, other pleasures can be ignored (contacts with peers, parents, etc.).

In order to help children to deal with stressful situations, parents and teachers need to gain an awareness of the signs of stress in children. The following list (Honig, 1986) can indicate that young children are experiencing high levels of stress in their lives:

Doesn't respond to friendly overtones
Daydreams frequently
Have grave, solemn face; rarely smiles or laughs
Cries a great deal for months after entry into group care (even though caregivers have been gentle and responsive)
Acts sullen, defiant
Punishes self
Is overly sensitive to mild criticism
Flinches if teacher or visiting adult approaches with outstretched arm
Reports proudly that he or she has hurt another child
Is overly vigilant about others' misdeeds
Is highly demanding
Bullies and may get other children to join in
Carries out repetitive, sterotyped play that may have destructive aspects
Clings to and shadows adult
Is unable to carry out sustained play with preschool peers
Has constant need to sleep, although physically well
Is preoccupied with frightening images of monsters or other threatening figures
Has dull, vacant expression
Is hyperactive or restless, wanders around room, cannot settle into constructive play
Has trembling of hands or facial twitches although apparently well
Talks compulsively about physical dangers
Grinds teeth during naptime
Has rigid facial expressions from taut muscles

Displays loss of perceptual acuity
Displays reduced attention capacity
Stimulates self constantly (by prolonged thumb-sucking, masturbation, rocking body back and forth, etc.) which children normally do occasionally for self-comfort
Seems jittery
Stutters, uses disfluent speech, or refuses to talk
Is clumsy on easy manual tasks due to muscular tensions
Frequently acts aggressively against others, even adults
Has frequent nightmares

HELPING STRATEGIES

Caring adults give purpose and direction and relief to the overly stressed child's life. Sheehy (1986) has described traumatized children's lives and their ability to develop "victorious personality" when assisted by caring adults. She describes this as the offering of a goal to the child...the goal being that the future offers the hope of getting better, thus lessening the stress being felt.

Teachers are especially important to children under stress. Lee (1983) described adult women who were greatly stressed and noted that "women who experienced greatest number of stressors and who received higher levels of social support had the lowest depression scores." The direct implication here for teachers is that they can become support persons for children under stress. When teachers help young children feel they have more control over important life aspects, the children may develop sturdier coping skills. Thus teachers (as well as parents) can help children in the following ways:

1. REMOVE AT LEAST ONE STRESSOR. Change or cancel at least one stressor in the child's life (decrease contact with another child or adult who causes conflict).

2. TRANSFER COPING STRATEGIES TO OTHER LIFE SITUATIONS. Demonstrate how a coping strategy may be used in another situation (listening and communication skills with adults...to interactions and building of friendships with peers).

3. TEACH NEW COPING STRATEGIES. Although coping strategies or evasive actions used by children can serve to temporarily relieve a child's state of extreme stress, adults must be observant to note when these behaviors/actions become self-destructive. When children rely on coping

behaviors over extended periods of time, the decision needs to be made to make a conscious effort to teach children some of the following:

- -how to make friends
- -how to act and manage conflict
- -how to communicate, be cooperative, and work together
- -how to be pleasantly assertive
- -how to solve problems

4. Teach children to identify and face stress.

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